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Branch-Qualifying Time Requirement Provides More Opportunities for Armor NCOs

Time and time again, I am asked about the 18-month requirement for certification of position as section sergeant or tank commander, platoon sergeant, and first sergeant. There are many who ask, why do we have the time requirement? Is it really such a big deal if I do not serve the 18 months before I do something else? Some others say it is too short a time for a leader to truly become proficient in his job level; they say leaders should perform their duties longer in these leadership positions. Still others ask about the challenges of getting into branch-qualifying positions, compared to TDA positions that are vital to our Army. Whichever side you're on, the fact is that we will continue to have such a requirement in the Armor Force.

Each promotion board gets some guidance, sent to the president of the board, for selecting the best Armor NCOs for promotion. This board guidance is always available for anyone to review by going to the Fort Knox Home Page. Board guidance always states that an NCO who has served 18 months in the leadership branch-qualifying position at current grade **and** has served in a leadership position of the next higher grade is regarded as *Best Qualified*. An NCO who has served at least 18 months in the leadership branch-qualifying position of current

grade is *Qualified*, and an NCO who has **not** met the 18-month time requirement in a leadership branch-qualified position at the current grade level is *Least Qualified*. So, it is definitely important that NCOs seek and fulfill the 18-month requirement of leadership branch-qualifying positions.

The 18-month time period was selected because this appeared to be the normal cycle of time for a unit to go through several key events that are critical in the development of leaders. Some of these events are: FTX, gunnery, CI, monthly counseling of soldiers, mentoring soldiers for promotion and ARTEP, to name a few. I do admit that there are units who may do the training events faster or slower than 18 months. However, in most cases, 18 months is the minimal time a leader will get to see everything one time and even that may not be enough to make that NCO proficient in leading with enough technical and tactical expertise at that current grade level. Senior leadership must counsel the NCO and tell them how they are doing, or not doing, as it pertains to branch qualification. It is key for soldiers to receive counseling if they are to be successful in promotion, at all levels.

The Army and the Armor Force is different then it was several years ago, and

it continues to change to meet the needs of an ever-changing world environment. I have heard it said that soldiers are being asked to do more then they used to have to do. That is true, partly because the equipment allows the soldier to do more, and also because tactical situations require it. But just because, 10 or 15 years ago, a platoon sergeant may have been in position for 6 to 8 years does not mean that we need to do this today. We must constantly measure what we need of our leaders and assess their ability to meet that need. It cannot be argued that the more times someone has to do a certain task, the better they normally become at the task. Once a leader has proven expertise of a certain task at his current job level, senior leaders must note this and assist the NCO in mastering the other skills that are required of him at this grade. Only after he has mastered all the tasks required of a qualified leader in his current grade should leaders allow the NCO to progress onto the next level of leadership responsibility.

Having NCOs perform duties in TDA assignments is crucial to the success of our Army. There are many positions that fall into this category, such as AC/RC duty, drill sergeant duty, recruiter

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duty, and instructor duty here at Fort Knox, to name several. As the Army changes, there will be a continuing need to support such positions. As an example: in Fiscal Year 99, for the MOS 19K, there were 1,082 SFCs competing for 418 platoon sergeant positions. For the MOS 19D, there were 537 SFCs competing for 182 platoon sergeant positions. Compare this to projections for FY 02, when in MOS 19K, 1,044 SFCs will compete for 315 platoon sergeant positions and, for MOS 19D, 592 SFCs will compete for 201 platoon sergeant positions.

Today, in quite a few units, staff sergeants are serving as platoon sergeants. Senior leaders must be aware of the needs of the total force so that we can work together to meet the needs of the

units, the NCOs, and the Army. Rotation cycles of assignments and special duties do not always meet the NCO's needs in getting into, or sometimes out of, the branch-qualifying positions as soon as they are eligible. When counseling the NCO, senior leaders should be advising the NCO in what TDA assignment he would best serve the Army after he branch-qualifies. Or, if he is in a TDA assignment, when and how best to get into a qualifying position that best meets the needs of the NCO, the unit, and the Armor Force. The senior leaders also should be working closely with the Armor Branch assignments office to have the NCO rotate out of the leadership job and into other beneficial duty positions once he has met the requirements of branch certification. If we are to keep the Armor NCO compe-

titive for promotion, it is essential that these NCOs rotate as they become branch-qualified at their current grade.

The Office of the Chief of Armor, along with Armor Branch and myself, are constantly working to improve the capabilities and opportunities of the Armor Force. Having an 18-month branch-qualifying requirement for NCO leadership positions is currently the best way for us to ensure that we can care for the Armor NCO Corps. It also assists in providing to commanders, now and in the future, great noncommissioned officers prepared and certified to execute their tasks on the future battlefields.

**"TODAY IS THE BEST DAY
TO BE A SOLDIER."**